



February 16, 2023

To the Members of the Human Services and Aging Committee:

Athena Health Care Systems believes the committee should not pass SB989, an act concerning nursing homes, specifically relating to the unfunded 4.1 Direct Care Minimum Staffing Mandate.

As a licensed nursing home administrator for nearly 30 years, I am a passionate person on the care and services we deliver to our residents, and we serve as the protector of our employees.

Athena Health Care Systems owns 21 skilled nursing and rehabilitation centers in Connecticut, caring for nearly 2,500 Connecticut patients who need short-term rehabilitation and long-term care.

In our nearly 40-year history, Athena Health Care Systems was founded on the principles of providing a high quality of care and customer service to our residents and their families. Our founding principles are being challenged daily as the skilled nursing industry faces unprecedented challenges related to the staffing pandemic. We felt this personally at Newtown Rehabilitation & Health Care Center. We faced staffing challenges and took immediate action to resolve the identified concerns and have been cooperatively working with the Department of Public Health.

We therefore strongly oppose the unfunded 4.1 Direct Care Minimum Staffing Mandate.

A [January 2023 job report](#) from the American Health Care Association (AHCA) and the National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL) analyzed data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics between January 2020 and December 2022.

Among the worrisome findings in the report is the nursing home workforce, which is at its lowest level since 1994. The report notes that skilled nursing staffing levels won't return to pre-pandemic levels until 2027. Nursing homes lost more employees than any other business in the health care sector—a total of 210,000 during the report's timeframe. In my nearly three decades of being a Licensed Nursing Home Administrator, I've seen the evolution of staffing challenges.

Our front-line workers are continuing to feel the pressure. We employ wonderful and selfless people who consistently go above and beyond, picking up extra shifts and missing out on precious time with their own families and friends. We are continuously working on preventing staff burnout in what's clearly a difficult hiring climate. This measure would only put added pressure on our dedicated staff. If the industry job climate doesn't improve—all signs show that it won't—this measure has the potential to do more damage than good as the staff is just not there. Thus, increasing burnout and industry turnover.



If we do not have the staff to safely admit patients into our centers this will additionally burden our hospitals.

Much of our workforce at Athena Health Care Systems is made up of our own employees, however, there are times we utilize temporary staffing agencies which cause bigger financial hardships in our industry as there are no price caps are on these agencies.

Our recruitment efforts remain a priority—we attend job fairs across the state and utilize the most popular online recruitment forums. We're utilizing all the tools available to us to remain an attractive career destination. We offer competitive incentives and have implemented shift differentials within our nursing departments. However, the state's long-term care workforce is seeing fewer applicants pursuing work in the industry. If you force this action this will stress the skilled nursing sector in the state causing closures for all facility owners.

This proposed, unfunded 4.1 Direct Care Minimum Staffing Mandate will not provide us with an influx of applicants. It will only exacerbate the problem. We will still have the same challenges, but worse, as this proposed mandate does not address the root cause of minimum staffing concerns.

As stated above, Athena Health Care Systems is strongly opposed to the unfunded 4.1 Direct Care Minimum Staffing Mandate and asks that you respectfully reconsider this proposal.

Thank you,

Christine McKinney, LNHA
Regional Director of Operations CT
Athena Health Care Systems